

CHAPTER IX

FREEDOM

“O, a bargeman’s is the life, for me,
Though there’s nothin’ to be seen but scener-ee!”
Old Song.

A PALE shaft of daylight slanted through the cabin doorway. It touched Tilda’s eyelids, and she opened them at once, stared, and relaxed her embrace.

“Awake?” asked Mrs. Mortimer’s voice from the shadow above the locker. “Well, I’m glad of that, because I want to get to the stove. Sardines,” said Mrs. Mortimer, “you can take out with a fork; but, packed as we are, when one moves the rest must follow suit. Is the boy stirring too?”

“No,” answered Tilda, peering down on him. But as she slipped her arm from under his neck, he came out of dreamland with a quick sob and a shudder very pitiful to hear and to feel. “Hush!” she whispered, catching at his hand and holding it firmly. “It’s *me*—Tilda; an’ you won’t go back there never no more.”

“I—I thought——” said he, and so with an easier sob lay still.

“O’ course you did,” Tilda soothed him. “But what’s ’appened to the boat, ma’am?”

“We are at anchor. If you want to know why, you had best crawl out and ask Mr. Bossom. He gave the order, and Stanislas has gone ashore to buy provisions. Marketing,” said Mrs. Mortimer, “is not my husband’s strong point, but we’ll hope for the best.”

The cabin doorway was low as well as narrow. Looking through it, Tilda now discerned in the gathering daylight

the lower half of Sam Bossom's person. He sat with his legs dangling over the break of the stairway, and as the children crawled forth they perceived that he was busy with a small notebook.

"Why are we stoppin' here?" demanded Tilda, with a glance about her.

The boat lay moored against the bank opposite the towpath, where old Jubilee stood with his face deep in a rosebag. He stood almost directly against the rising sun, the effect of which was to edge his outline with gold, while his flank presented the most delicate of lilac shadows. Beyond him stretched a level country intersected with low hedges, all a-dazzle under the morning beams. To the left the land sloped gently upward to a ridge crowned, a mile away, by a straggling line of houses and a single factory chimney. Right astern, over Mr. Bossom's shoulder, rose the clustered chimneys, tall stacks, church spires of the dreadful town, already wreathed in smoke. It seemed to Tilda, although here were meadows and clean waterflags growing by the brink, and a wide sky all around, that yet this ugly smoke hung on their wake and threatened them.

"Why are we stoppin'?" she demanded again, as Sam Bossom, with a hurried if friendly nod, resumed his calculations.

"And four is fifteen, and fifteen is one-an'-three," said he. "Which," he added, looking up as one who would stand no contradiction, "is the 'alf of two-an'-six . . . You'll excuse me, missy, but business first an' pleasure afterwards. We're stoppin' here for the day."

"For the day?" enquired Tilda, with a dismayed look astern. "An' we've ~~en~~ come this far!"

"Pretty good goin', I should call it," Mr. Bossom assured her cheerfully. "Six locks we've passed while you was asleep, not countin' the stop-lock. But maybe you're not used to travel by canal?"

"I thank the Lord, no; or I'd never 'ave put Mr. 'Ucks up to it. Why, I'd *walk* it quicker, crutch an' all."

“What’d you call a reas’nable price for eggs, now—at this time o’ year?” asked Mr. Bossom, abstractedly sucking the stump of a pencil and frowning at his notebook. But of a sudden her words seemed to strike him, and he looked up round-eyed.

“You ain’t tellin’ me *you* put this in ‘Ucks’s mind?”

“‘Course I did,” owned Tilda proudly.

“An’ got me sent to Stratford-on-Avon!” Mr. Bossom added. “Me that stood your friend when *you* was in a tight place!”

“No, I didn’. It was ‘Ucks that mentioned Stratford—said you’d find a cargo of beer there, which sounded all right: an’ Mortimer jumped at it soon as ever he ‘eard the name. Mortimer said it was the dream of his youth an’ the perspiration of his something else—I can’t tell the ezact words; but when he talked like that, how was I to guess there was anything wrong with the place?”

“There ain’t anything wrong wi’ the *place*, that I know by,” Mr. Bossom admitted.

“But I remember another thing he said, because it sounded to me even funnier. He said, ‘Sweet swan of Avon upon the banks of Thames, that did so please Eliza and our James.’ Now what did he mean by that?”

Mr. Bossom considered and shook his head.

“Some bank-’oliday couple, I reckon; friends of his, maybe. But about that swan—Mortimer must ‘a-been talkin’ through his hat. Why to get to the Thames that bird ‘d have to go up the Stratford-on-Avon to Kingswood cut, down the Warwick an’ Birmingham to Budbrooke—with a trifle o’ twenty-one locks at Hatton to be worked or walked round; cross by the Warwick an’ Napton—another twenty-two locks; an’ all the way down the Oxford Canal, which from Napton is fifty miles good.”

“She’d be an old bird before she got there, at our pace,” Tilda agreed. “But, o’ course, Mr. Bossom, if we want to get to Stratford quick, an’ you don’t, you’ll make the pace what you like an’ never mind us.”

“Who said I didn’ want to get to Stratford?” he asked almost fiercely, and broke off with a groan. “Oh,

it's 'ard!—it's 'ard! . . . And me sittin' here calcilatin' eggs an' milk domestic-like and thinkin' what bliss . . . But you don't understand. O' course you don't. Why should you?"

Tilda placed her hands behind her back, eyed him for half-a-minute, and sagely nodded.

"Well, I never!" she said. "Oh, my goodness gracious mercy me!"

"I can't think what you're referrin' to," stammered Mr. Bossom.

"So we're in love, are we?"

He cast a guilty look around.

"There's Mortimer, comin' down the path, an' only two fields away."

"And it's a long story, is it? Well, I'll let you off this time," said Tilda. "But listen to this, an' don't you fergit it. If along o' your dawdlin' they lay hands on Arthur Miles here, I'll never fergive you—no, never."

"You leave that to me, missie. And as for dawdlin', why if you understood about canals you'd know there's times when dawdlin' makes the best speed. Now just you bear in mind the number o' things I've got to think of. First, we'll say, there's you an' the boy. Well, who's goin' to look for you here, aboard an innercent boat laid here between locks an' waitin' till the full of her cargo comes down to Tizzer's Green wharf or Ibbetson's? Next"—he checked off the items on his fingers—"there's the Mortimers. In duty to 'Ucks, I got to choose Mortimer a pitch where he'll draw a 'ouse. Bein' new to this job, I'd like your opinion; but where, thinks I, 'll he likelier draw a 'ouse than at Tizzer's Green yonder?—two thousand op'ratives, an' I doubt if the place has ever seen a travellin' theayter since it started to grow. Anyway, Mortimer has been pushin' inquiries: an' that makes Secondly. Thirdly, I don't know much about play-actors, but Mortimer tells me he gets goin' at seven-thirty an' holds 'em spellbound till something after ten; which means that by the time we've carted back the scenery an' shipped an' towed

it, *an'* got the tarpaulins on, *an'* harnessed up, we shan't get much change out of midnight. Don't lose your patience now, because we haven't come to the end of it yet—not by a long way. By midnight, say, we get started *an'* haul up to Knowlsey top lock, which is a matter of three miles. What do we find there?"

"Dunno," said Tilda wearily. "A brass band per'aps *an'* a nillumynated address, congratlatin' yer."

Sam ignored this sarcasm.

"We find, likely as not, a dozen boats hauled up for the night, blockin' the fairway, *an'* all the crews ashore at the 'Ring o' Bells' or the 'Lone Woman,' where they doss *an'* where the stablin' is. Not a chance for us to get through before mornin'; *an'* then in a crowd with everybody wantin' to know what Sam Bossom's doin' with two children aboard. Whereas," he concluded, "if we time ourselves to reach Knowlsey by seven in the mornin', they'll all have locked through *an'* left the coast clear."

Said Tilda, still contemptuous—

"I'd like to turn Bill loose on 'this navigation o' yours, as you call it."

"Oo's Bill?"

"He works the engine on Gavel's roundabouts; *an'* he's the best *an'* the cleverest man in the world."

"Unappre'shated, I s'pose?"

"Why if you 'ad Bill aboard this boat, in less 'n a workin' day he'd 'ave her fixed up with boiler *an'* engine complete, *an'* be drivin' her like a train."

Mr. Bossom grinned.

"I'd like to see 'im twenty minutes later, just to congratulate 'im. You see, missie, a boat can't go faster than the water travels past 'er—which is rhyme, though I made it myself, *an'* likewise reason. Can she, now?"

"I s'pose not," Tilda admitted doubtfully.

"Well now, if your friend Bill started to drive th' old *Success to Commerce* like a train, first he'd be surprised *an'* disappointed to see her heavin' a two-foot wave ahead of her—maybe more, maybe less—along

both banks ; an' next it might annoy 'im a bit when these two waves fell together an' raised a weight o' water full on her bows, whereby she'd travel like a slug, an' the 'arder he drove the more she wouldn' go ; let be that she'd give 'im no time to cuss, even when I arsked 'im perlitley what it felt like to steer a monkey by the tail. Next an' last, if he should 'appen to find room for a look astern at the banks, it might vex 'im—bein' the best o' men as well as the cleverest—to notice that he 'adn't left no banks, to speak of. Not that 'twould matter to 'im pers'nally—'avin' no further use for 'em."

Tilda, confounded by this close reasoning, was about to retreat with dignity under the admission that, after all, canal-work gave no scope to a genius such as Bill's, when 'Dolph came barking to announce the near approach of Mr. Mortimer.

Mr. Mortimer, approaching with a gait modelled upon Henry Irving's, was clearly in radiant mood. Almost he vaulted the stile between the field and the canal bank. Alighting, he hailed the boat in nautical language—

"Ahoy, Smiles ! What cheer, my hearty ?"

"Gettin' along nicely, sir," reported Mr. Bossom. "Nicely, but peckish. The same to you, I 'ope."

"Good," was the answer. "Speak to the mariners : fall to 't. yarely, or we run ourselves aground. Bestir, bestir !"

Tilda, who for the last minute or so had been unconsciously holding Arthur Miles by the hand, was astonished of a sudden to find it trembling in hers.

"You mustn't mind what Mr. Mortimer says," she assured the child encouragingly—"it's on'y his way."

Mr. Mortimer stepped jauntily across the gang-plank, declaiming with so much of gesture as a heavy market-basket permitted—

"The pirates of Parga, who dwell by the waves,
And teach the pale Franks what it is to be slaves,
Shall leave by the beach, Smiles, the long galley and oar—"

I have done it, Smiles. In the words of the old-time

classical geometer, I have found it ; and as he remarked on another occasion (I believe subsequently), ' Give me where to stand, and I will move the Universe.' His precise words, if I recall the original Greek, were *Dos Pou Sto*—and the critical ear will detect a manly—er—self-reliance in the terse monosyllables. In these days," pursued Mr. Mortimer, setting down the market-basket, unbuttoning his furred overcoat, extracting a green and yellow bandanna from his breastpocket and mopping his heated brow, " in these days we have lost that self-confidence. We are weary, disillusioned. We have ceased to expect gold at the rainbow's feet. Speaking without disrespect to the poet Shelley"—here he lifted his hat and replaced it—" a new Penëus does *not* roll his fountains against the morning star, whatever that precise—er—operation may have been. But let us honour the aspiration, Smiles, though the chill monitor within forbid us to endorse it. ' A loftier Argo '"—Mr. Mortimer indicated the *Success to Commerce* with a sweep of the hand—

" A loftier *Argo* cleaves the main
 Fraught with a later prize ;
 Another Orpheus—you'll excuse the comparison—sings again,
 And loves, and weeps—and dies."

" Stanislas, you have not forgotten the eggs, I hope ? " interposed the voice of Mrs. Mortimer from the cabin.

" I have not, my bud. Moreover, as I was just explaining to our friend, I have secured a *Pou Sto*—a hall, my chick—or perhaps it might be defined more precisely as a—er—loft. It served formerly—or, as the poets would say, whilom—as a barracks for the Salvation Army ; in more recent times as a store for—er—superphosphates. But it is commodious, and possesses a side-chamber which will serve us admirably for a green-room when the proprietor—an affable person by the name of Tench—has removed the onions at present drying on the floor ; which he has engaged to do."

" Are you tellin' me," inquired Sam, " that you've been and, 'ired the room ? "

“ At the derisory charge of four-and-six for the night. As a business man, I believe in striking while the iron is hot. Indeed, while we are on the subject, I may mention that I have ordered the bills. *Professor and Madame St. Maur*—my Arabella will, I know, forgive my reverting to the name under which she won her maiden laurels—it cost me a pang, my dear Smiles, to reflect that the fame to be won here, the honour of having popularised HIM, here on the confines of his native Arden, will never be associated with the name of Mortimer. *Sic vos non vobis*, as the Mantuan has poignantly observed. But for the sake of the children—and, by the way, how do my bantlings find themselves this morning? Tol-lollish, I trust?—for the sake of the children it was necessary, as we used to say with the Pytchley, to obscure the scent. Talking of scent, Smiles, it might be advisable—what with the superphosphates and the onions—to take some counteracting steps, which your ingenuity may be able to suggest. The superphosphates especially are—er—potent. And, by one of those coincidences we meet, perhaps, oftener than we note, Mr. Tench’s initial is ‘S’—standing for Samuel.”

Mr. Mortimer extracted an egg from his basket and rubbed it with his bandanna thoughtfully before passing it down to his wife.

“ So you’ve been an’ ordered the bills too? ” murmured Mr. Bossom. “ And what will the bills run to?—if, as the treasurer, I may make so bold.”

“ To the sum of five shillings precisely, which will, of course, be hypothecated as a first charge upon our takings, and which I ask you, my dear Smiles, as treasurer to debit to that account in due form, here and now.” It would have been hard to conceive any manner more impressively business-like than Mr. Mortimer’s as he made this demand. “ You will excuse my putting it so plainly, Smiles, but I may venture a guess that in the matter of conducting a theatrical tour you are, comparatively speaking, a tiro? ”

"I've got to account to 'Ucks, if that's what you mean," Sam assented.

"The bill, Smiles, is the theatrical agent's first thought; the beginning which is notoriously half the battle. For three-inch lettering—and to that I restricted myself—five shillings can only be called dirt cheap. Listen—

" PROFESSOR AND MADAME ST. MAUR,
OF THE LEADING LONDON THEATRES

PART I.—WITH VOICE AND LUTE, A POT-POURRI
PART II.—AN HOUR WITH THE BEST DRAMATISTS
THE WHOLE TO CONCLUDE WITH THAT SIDE-
SPLITTING DUOLOGUE ENTITLED,
' COURTSHIP IN THE RAIN '

PASSION WITH REFINEMENT AND MIRTH WITHOUT
VULGARITY

*Reserved Seats, One Shilling. Unreserved, Sixpence.
Gallery (limited), Threepence only*

DOORS OPEN AT 7.30 ; TO COMMENCE AT 8.
CARRIAGES AT HALF-PAST TEN."

"Why carriages?" asked Mr. Bossom.

"It's the usual thing," answered Mr. Mortimer.

"You bet it isn't, at Tizzer's Green. Well, the first job is breakfast, an' after breakfast we'll get Old Jubilee round by the footbridge an' make shift to borrow a cart down at Ibbetson's, for the scenery. You didn't forget the bacon?"

Mr. Mortimer unwrapped a parcel of greasy paper and exhibited six slices.

"A Baconian—O, Shakespeare, forgive!"

He said this in a highly jocular manner, and accompanied it with a wink at Tilda, who did not understand the allusion. But again she felt the child's hand thrill and tremble, and turned about, eyeing him curiously.

Her movement drew upon him the Mortimerian flow, ever ebullient and ever by trifles easily deflected.

“ Yes, Arthur Miles—if I may trouble you to pass it down to the cook’s galley—thank you ; these eggs too—be careful of them—Yes, we are bound for Stratford-on-Avon, Shakespeare’s birthplace ! ” Again he lifted and replaced his hat. “ Envidable boy ! What would young Stanislas Mortimer not have given at your age to set eyes on that Mecca ! Yet, perchance, he may claim that he comes, though late, as no unworthy votary. A Passionate Pilgrim, shall we say ? Believe me, it is in the light of a pilgrimage that I regard this—er—jaunt. Shall we dedicate it to youth, and name it Childe Arthur’s Pilgrimage ? ”

By this time smoke was issuing in a steady stream from the stove-pipe above the cabin-top, and presently from within came the hiss and fragrance of bacon frying. Sam Bossom had stepped ashore, and called to the children to help in collecting sticks and build a fire for the tea-kettle. Tilda, used though she was to nomad life, had never known so delightful a picnic. Only her eyes wandered back apprehensively, now and then, to the smoke of the great town. As for Arthur Miles—Childe Arthur, as Mr. Mortimer henceforth insisted on their calling him—he had apparently cast away all dread of pursuit. Once, inhaling the smell of the wood fire, he even laughed aloud—a strange laugh, and at its close uncannily like a sob. Tilda, watching him quietly, observed that he trembled too—trembled all over—from time to time. She observed, too, that this happened when he looked up from the fire and the kettle ; but also that in looking up he never once looked back, that his eyes always wandered along the still waterway and to the horizon ahead. This puzzled her completely.

Breakfast followed and was delightful, though not unaccompanied by terrors. A barge hove in sight, wending downwards from Bursfield, and the children hid. It passed them, and after ten minutes came a

couple from the same direction, with two horses hauling at the first, and the second (which Sam called a butty-boat) towed astern. Each boat had a steersman, and the steersman called to Sam and asked for news of his young woman; whereupon Sam called back, offering to punch their heads for twopence. But it was all very good-natured. They passed on laughing, and the children re-emerged. The sun shone; the smoke of the embers floated against it, across the boat, on the gentlest of breezes; the food was coarse, but they were hungry; the water motionless, but Mr. Mortimer's talk seemed to put a current into it, calling them southward and to high adventures—southward where no smoke was, and the swallows skimmed over the scented water-meads. Even the gaudily-painted cups and saucers, which Mr. Mortimer produced from a gaudily-painted cupboard, made part of the romance. Tilda had never seen the like. They were decorated round the rims with bands of red and green and yellow; the very egg-cups were similarly banded; and portraits of the late Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort decorated the cupboard's two panels.

Breakfast over, she helped Mr. Mortimer to wash up, and while she helped was conscious of a new and uncomfortable feeling of which she could make no account with herself. It was not the stuffiness of the cabin that oppressed her; nor the dread of pursuit; nor anxiety for Arthur Miles, lest he should run off and fall into mischief. By stooping a little she could keep him in view, for he had settled himself on the after-deck, and was playing with 'Dolph—or, rather, was feeling 'Dolph's ears and paws in a wondering fashion, as one to whom even a dog was something new and marvellous; and 'Dolph, stretched on his side in the sunshine, was undergoing the inspection with great complaisance. No; the cause of her restlessness was yet to seek.

She went out, and sat upon the cabin step for a while, deep in thought, her eyes fixed on Sam Rossom, who, just beyond the cabin roof, was stooping over the well

and untying its tarpaulins. By and by she sprang to her feet and walked forward to him.

"Mr. Bossom," she said with decision, "I know what's the matter with me."

"Then," answered Sam, "you're luckier than most people."

"I want a wash."

"Do you, now? Well, as to that, o' course you're the best judge; but I 'adn't noticed it."

"You wouldn't, 'ardly," said Tilda, "sein' as I 'ad one on'y yestiddy. But that's the worst of 'orspitals. They get you inside, an' a'most before you know where you are, they've set up a 'abit. I dessay it'll wear off, all right; but oh, Mr. Bossom——"

"Would you mind callin' me Sam? It's more usual."

"Oh, Mr. Sam, this mornin' I'm feelin' it all over. If I got a pailful out o' the canal, now?"

"I wouldn't recommend it—not 'ereabouts." Sam, eyeing her with his head cocked slightly aside, spoke gently as one coaxing a victim of the drink habit. "But, as it 'appears, a furlong this side of Ibbetson's you'll find the very place. Take Arthur Miles along with you. He'll be thankful for it, later on—an' I'll loan you a cake o' soap."